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SPECIAL REPORT

THE CONFLICT IN SOUTH ARABIA

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THE CONFLICT IN SOUTH ARABIA

The recent British campaign to put down the Egyptian-aided tribal rebellion in the Radfan area of the South Arabian Federation has focused attention on a border that has never been wholly defined and on problems of dissidence and sovereignty which for centuries have plagued whoever has held Aden and its surrounding hinterland. The largest natural port between Suez and the Persian Gulf, Aden has always played a major role in the trade of the southwest corner of the Arabian Peninsula, and its history has been intimately bound up with that of Yemen proper. Indeed, in traditional Arab usage, the term "al-Yemen" has been understood to include the area that now comprises the South Arabian Federation, and Yemenis and Arab nationalists often refer to this territory as the "occupied Yemeni south." Cairo, despite only lukewarm support from the Yemeni republican regime, now appears determined to end that "occupation." London seems equally determined to hang on because Aden's strategic importance--both militarily and economically--is all the more pronounced in view of the loss of British influence elsewhere in the Middle East.

History of Foreign Control

The tribesmen of the British-protected Federation are Shafiis--Sunni (orthodox) Muslims who are indistinguishable from their counterparts in the southern and western lowlands of Yemen proper, an area known as the Tihama. These tribesmen of the Aden hinterland have been virtually independent for long periods, and their relationship to the tribes of the Tihama and the Yemeni highlands to the north and east has varied greatly over the years. The Zaidi Imams who traditionally ruled Yemen occupied the Aden hinterland for a time during the 17th century and have claimed sovereignty over the area ever since, even though this claim was usually unenforceable. The Turks, during the periods when they controlled Yemen, also asserted a claim to Aden and the surrounding country.

In 1839, at the time the British seized the port, the area was close to anarchy and control from the north was nonexistent. The British may at first have been primarily interested in trade, but as the importance of Aden as a bunkering station and as a major link on the route to India became apparent, they gradually extended their influence into the hinterland, first through some 90

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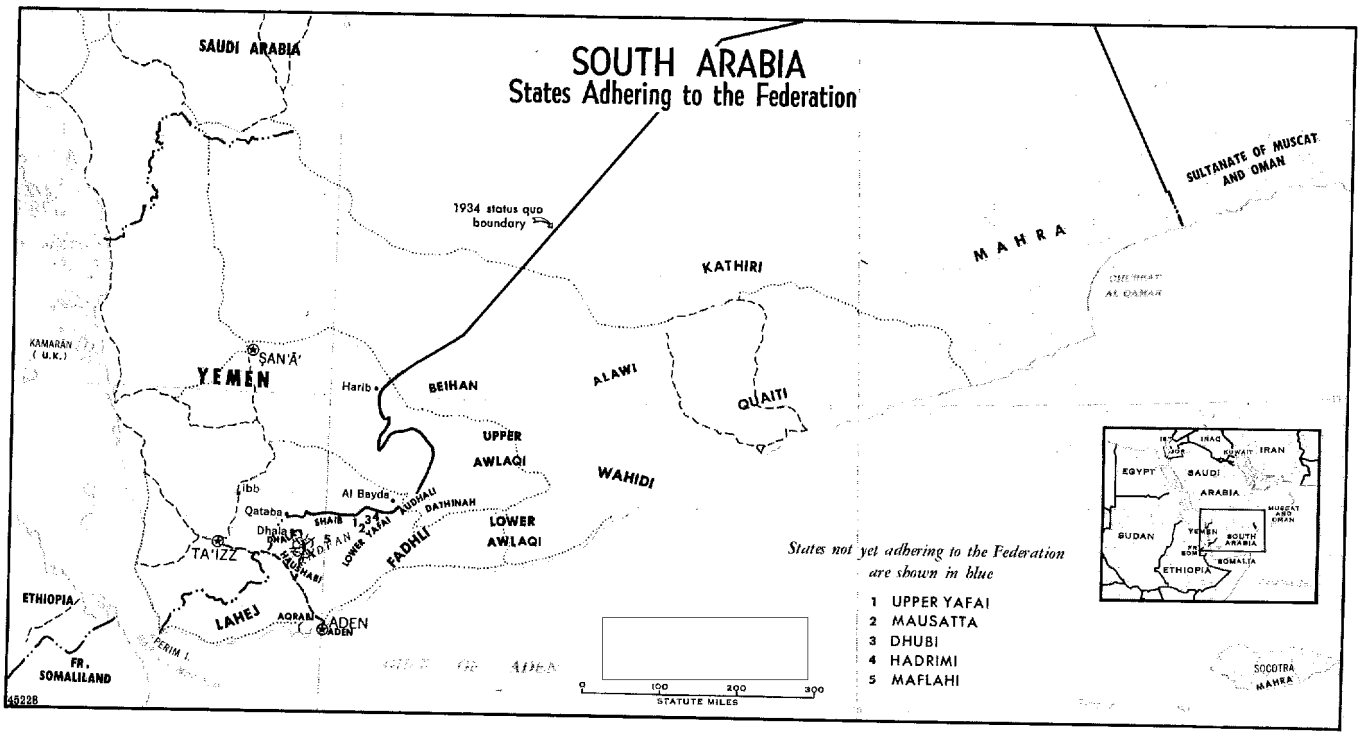

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treaties of commerce with local sheikhs and petty rulers, and then through a number of formal treaties of protection with the leaders of tribal confederations throughout the area. Eventually some 23 "autonomous Arab states" under the protection of the UK were established. These were divided for administrative reasons into areas known as the Eastern and Western Aden Protectorate.

The Shafiis, who are traders, farmers, and nomads, had long resented the domination of the warlike Zaidis, who are Shia Muslims. The Shafii tribesmen therefore welcomed the British treaties, which in effect were a guarantee of independence, as actual British interference in tribal affairs was minimal. However, the Zaidi Imams and the Turks, while acquiescing in a situation which they could not correct, at no time abandoned their claims to residual sovereignty over the area.

With the British exercising only the lightest control over the hinterland, tribal disputes were endemic, and at the turn of the century, troubles along the de facto boundary arising from this cause led the Turks, who then controlled Yemen, to propose border demarcation. A frontier commission was set up, and between 1902 and 1904 the frontier was demarcated from the Red Sea to Qataba, north of Aden. Farther to the east, where the border traverses impassable

mountains and featureless desert, both sides agreed on "blue" and "violet" lines drawn on maps in lieu of actual demarcation. This arrangement was ratified in 1914, but the advent of World War I rendered it largely meaningless almost at once. Turkish troops advanced to within sight of Aden in 1915 and occupied considerable portions of the British-protected area throughout the war.

Yemen Versus the UK

Following the departure of the Turks in 1918, Zaidi Imam Yahya, who was in effective control of Yemen proper, refused to recognize the British-Turkish frontier demarcation and vigorously asserted his claim to the whole of the "Yemeni south." Zaidi incursions into the protectorate took place on several occasions in the 1920s, and two British attempts to negotiate a treaty with Yahya proved fruitless. In 1934, however, a treaty recognizing the status quo as it then existed was finally signed. While no new demarcation on the ground was attempted, the agreed de facto frontier differed little from that of 1904.

Interpretation of the treaty by the two sides differed sharply, however. The British believed that they had gained Yemeni recognition of a permanent frontier and of their arrangments with the tribal leaders within the protectorate. Yahya, on the other hand, felt the British had recognized residual Yemeni sovereignty over the south and had agreed not to disturb the tribal pattern then existing within the area.

The period of relative calm that followed this treaty ended with the close of World War II and particularly after the assassination of Yahya and the accession of his strong-minded son, Imam Ahmad, in 1948. Until this time the British aim in the protectorate had been merely to keep the territory free of foreign interference, and, for this, little direct control was needed. As British influence and power in the Middle East shrank after the war, and as Arab nationalism, already a major force in the more sophisticated Arab lands to the north, made inroads among the growing proletariat in Aden port, the military base and refining facilities there grew at once more important and more precarious in British eyes.

London's response to this problem was first to establish greater control over the protectorate and then to suggest that Aden, then a crown colony, join the various sheikhdoms and sultanates of the protectorate in a federation which might be given independence at some undefined future date. This suggestion, however, raised a whole set of new problems. Adeni merchants and traders felt that the colony's wealth would be squandered in an attempt to develop the backward hinterland. Arab nationalists in Aden saw the federation as a device to perpetuate British control. Tribal leaders viewed the plan as a scheme enhancing British control from Aden over the largely unadministered protectorate.

Imam Ahmad was infuriated by the whole idea. He was already convinced that Yemeni emigrés and dissidents residing in Aden had a hand in the assassination of his father; and indeed numerous Yemeni nationals had been plotting serious changes in the Yemeni regime for some time. From Ahmad's point of view, moreover, the federation plan carried the unacceptable implication of absolute British sovereignty over the area. His policy, instituted at the first sign the British planned greater control over the protectorate and well before the federation idea was made public in 1954, was to supply arms and money to dissident subtribes resentful of the authority of the British and of the few powerful tribal chiefs through whom they worked.

Despite an abortive attempt to arrange a modus vivendi in London in 1950, Ahmad persistently strove to keep the hinterland of the protectorate in turmoil and to a large degree, succeeded. His efforts were aided after 1954 by the revolutionary regime in Cairo, to whom he turned for aid in a departure from Yemen's traditional policy of isolation. Egyptian arms crossed the border from Yemen into the protectorate, and Cairo's Voice of the Arabs--whose appeal, however, was primarily to the urban Arab nationalists in Aden--frequently called for resistance to the British.

By 1955, when Ahmad had to devote himself to internal matters following an attempted coup in Yemen, conditions in much of the more remote areas of the protectorate bordered on anarchy. With the rise of anti-British feeling in the Middle East following the Suez crisis, Ahmad again interested himself in the "southern" problem. He concluded an arms deal with the USSR, and by 1957 automatic weapons were used for the first time by the dissidents in the protectorate.

Formation of the Federation

Meanwhile, despite problems compounded both by Arab nationalism and tribal dissidence, the dwindling British position elsewhere in the Middle East caused London to assign ever greater priority to maintaining its position in Aden. A War Office white paper in 1960 called the base at Aden vital to British defenses, and Iraqi Premier Qasim's claim to Kuwait the following year dramatized the base's role in the protection of British interests in the Persian Gulf. As Ahmad became increasingly involved in maintaining firm control within Yemen proper, the British gradually re-established control of the anarchistic hinterland of the protectorate, although areas such as Radfan and the Lower Yafai Sultanate remained pockets of chronic dissidence.

In 1959, the federation idea, which had been allowed to lie dormant, was revived, and six states of the Western Protectorate formed the nucleus

of the present federation. Other states joined in due course, and at the time of the Yemeni revolution in 1962--which followed on the heels of Imam Ahmad's death and overthrew his successor, Imam Badr--there were 11 states within the federation.

Resistance to the federation idea in Aden itself remained strong, however. The merchant class continued to argue against any move that would give a large measure of political control to the backward sultanates, while the Arab nationalists increased their agitation against the British presence itself. Nationalist sentiment is centered in the large and powerful Aden trade union confederation and in its political arm, the People's Socialist Party (PSP), headed by Abdullah Asnag. This grouping has been financed and to some extent guided from Cairo, thereby raising British apprehensions as to the course it would follow should it come to power--a strong possibility in any open election. Political problems in Aden are further complicated by the large colony of emigré Yemeni nationals, who the PSP claims should be enfranchised in any future election.

Nevertheless, when the Yemeni revolution in September 1962 placed a strongly Egyptian-oriented government--the Sallal regime--on the northern border of the federation, the British tried both to strengthen the federation itself and to dilute the political weight of the Adeni Arab nationalists by pressing for rapid Adeni accession to the federation. This was accomplished in May 1963; there are now 14 members of the federation --virtually the entire former Western Protectorate.

Aden vs. the Yemeni Revolution

Although the Yemeni revolution had the effect of creating a government to the north that could appeal both to the Arab nationalists in Aden and to the dissident tribesmen in the hinterland, the border area remained relatively quiet during the first year the Sallal government was in power. Egyptian and Yemeni republican attention was centered in the north and east of Yemen, where the Zaidi royalists led by Badr and aided by Saudi Arabia were concentrated. In addition, the growing Egyptian presence in Yemen dissipated much of the initial enthusiasm for the republican regime among Adenis and tribesmen alike. Firing across the border and minor incursions were frequent, but there were no major incidents.

When the agreement negotiated by US Ambassador Bunker calling for Saudi and Egyptian disengagement came into effect in June of 1963, however, the situation began to change. Arms traffic to the royalists from Saudi Arabia virtually ceased, and arms began to flow north into the royalist-held areas of Yemen from Baihan, on the eastern fringe of the federation. Western advisers, including a number of British nationals, have been observed with the royalist forces. Air surveillance of the border area by both the British and the Egyptians increased.

The British motivation in allowing aid to reach the royalists through federation territory grew in part out of London's desire to prevent the Yemeni republicans and Egyptians from consolidating their hold on Yemen proper, but an additional factor has been increasing evidence of Egyptian-inspired attempts at sabotage and subversion within the federation. The most dramatic of these efforts was the attempt to blow up High Commissioner Trevaskis at Aden airport last December. Trevaskis was himself the author of the federation idea and a strong-minded advocate of a "get tough" policy toward Cairo. He immediately cracked down on the PSP in Aden and pressed London for a stronger stand along the Yemeni border.

A further British consideration is the need to demonstrate to the tribal chiefs of the federation the viability of the British guarantee through a policy of retaliation for incursions into federation territory from Yemen. The March air attack on the Yemeni fort at Harib was a gesture of this nature, while the present Radfan campaign is an attempt to dramatize the British determination to curb dissidence before the revolt spreads to much larger areas of the federation.

Outlook

There is little question that the Egyptians will attempt to broaden the revolt around and, if possible, inside Aden.

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[redacted] Following the Harib raid, the full weight of the Egyptian propaganda apparatus was turned against the British position in the federation. Since the Radfan operation, the Egyptians in Yemen have begun large-scale recruiting of tribesmen from the border area for training in Yemen and for eventual infiltration and guerrilla operations within the federation. Sabotage in Aden itself is also almost certain to increase.

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Nasir appears determined to color his activities in Yemen with an anti-British, anti-colonialist hue. In this way he no doubt hopes to make Saudi Crown Prince Faysal's continued tacit support for the royalist cause politically embarrassing. Faysal, however, is likely to view the anti-British campaign as a sign of Nasir's weakness.

The Yemeni republicans are not entirely happy at the turn this campaign has taken. They continue to maintain the old Zaidi claims to sovereignty over the south, but have indicated that they do not wish to press those claims at this time. The newly reconstituted Yemeni Government has suggested to the US ambassador in Yemen that some sort of modus vivendi with the British can be reached, and the British in turn have surfaced the idea of a mutual pull-back of troops along the border and of UN supervision of the area. However, such an accommodation is unlikely, given Egypt's capacity for independently causing trouble within the federation and the strong anti-Nasir political pressures that the Egyptian anti-British propaganda campaign has generated in the UK.

Nasir apparently has no desire for a direct military confrontation with the British. He nevertheless is likely to step up his efforts at sabotage and subversion within the federation, in hopes that this kind of pressure will eventually enable him to "win" or at least extricate himself from Yemen.

The British, however, are convinced by recent events that Nasir intends to drive them from a base they feel they cannot afford to lose. As long as this feeling is running strongly, they will, through their aid to the royalists, continue to see to it that Nasir cannot end his war in Yemen on terms he would find politically acceptable.

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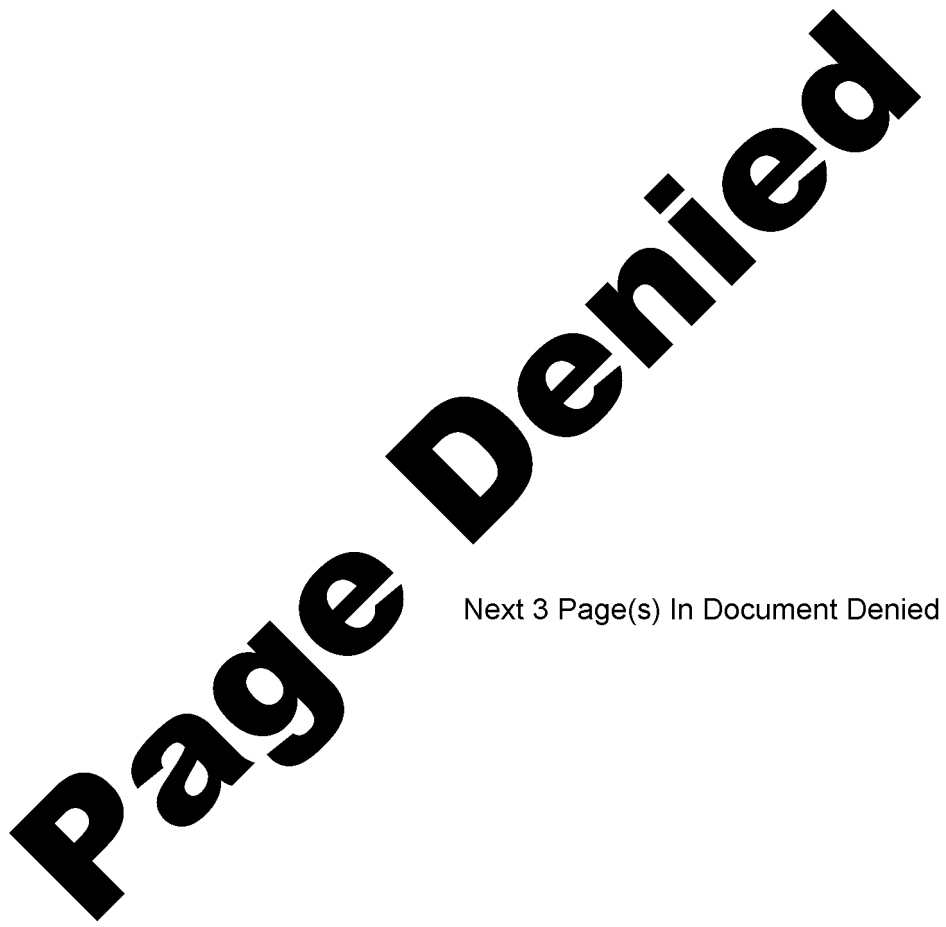

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